

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
OFFICE OF MARINE SAFETY

In the Matter of:

"FIRE ON BOARD M/V COLUMBIA"

Date of Fire June 6, 2000

Docket No.:
DCA00MM030

Recorded Interview MELISSA WHEELER.

On Board
M/V COLUMBIA
Juneau, Alaska

June 9, 2000

BEFORE:

THE INTERVIEWER:

Terry Weaver
NTSB Investigator
Survival Factors Group Chairman

JEFF HURST
Safety Officer
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and Public Facilities
Alaska Marine Highway System
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DOUG STERN
Alternate Chief Mate
M/V Columbia

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INTERVIEWED BY:

MS. TERRY WEAVER: Would you state your name?

MS. WHEELER: Melissa Wheeler.

MS. TERRY WEAVER: Spell your last name,
please.

MS. WHEELER: W-h-e-e-l-e-r.

EXAMINATION

BY THE INTERVIEWER, MS. TERRY WEAVER:

Q And how long have you worked on board the Columbia?

A Well, when I first started out here ten years ago, this was my first dispatch. I have not been here a solid ten years.

Q And what is your position on board the Columbia?

A Chief Purser.

Q And what are your responsibilities as the chief purser?

A In general?

Q Yes.

A Financial responsibilities, accounting for all of the ships' funds. As one of the responsibilities, we are the medical officer on board, so to speak, designated our highest level of training--

1 or actually I should say the lowest level of training
2 is the ETT.

3 Q And what does that consist of?

4 A Emergency Trauma Training. It's basic life
5 support. We don't get to do anything with needles or
6 drugs. So, you know, whenever we can, if there is an
7 emergency, we try to find a doctor on board, or
8 somebody with more experience than we have.

9 But, you know, we're trained in basic life
10 support.

11 Q Were you on board the Columbia at the time of
12 the engine room fire?

13 A Yes, I was.

14 Q How were you notified of the fire?

15 A The alarm, the emergency alarm.

16 Q The general alarm?

17 A The general alarm.

18 Q Where were you when you were notified?

19 A I was at the Purser's Counter.

20 Q Do you remember around what time this was?

21 A It was 1210. I do remember quite well.

22 Q What did you do upon notification?

23 A I listened. I listened for what the
24 emergency was, and where it was. The announcements
25 over the PA, basically.

1 Q What are your responsibilities during an
2 emergency?

3 A I work with the chief steward in coordinating
4 the muster of passengers to the muster stations, the
5 sweeping and the mustering of the passengers to the
6 boat deck.

7 Q Have you received any training to perform
8 those duties?

9 A We have weekly drills. And in those drills,
10 we learn all the time.

11 Q Could you just -- yes, go ahead.

12 A Go ahead.

13 Q Describe what takes place from that routine
14 drill.

15 A Well, just about everything that we did after
16 this emergency, I kept referring to it as "our drill",
17 you know. It's just about everything we did we do
18 during our drills, it seemed to me.

19 Q What were some of those things?

20 A Well, the stewards that are assigned to sweep
21 the crew and passenger areas, they come, they check in
22 with me to let me know that those areas have been
23 swept.

24 They also check in with the chief steward.
25 The first thing that happened, as the junior purser on

1 duty, make sure that the elevator is locked out so that
2 nobody gets in it.

3 So that's one of the first things that
4 happens. And then the stewards start coming to me one
5 at a time. And they give me their station bill number,
6 their name. I check them off my list to make sure that
7 they've completed their duties.

8 And at that point in time, I stand by. I'm
9 listening to the radio and just kind of listening for
10 what's going to happen next.

11 In this emergency, the next thing that
12 happened was I was ordered above deck to the boat deck
13 by the captain -- after all of the -- after the
14 passengers were mustered and it was reported to the
15 bridge that they had mustered.

16 Q Okay, let's go back to the date of the
17 accident. You said you heard an announcement? You
18 heard the general alarm?

19 A We listened for the general alarms. And then
20 we listened to where the emergency is located.

21 Q And what did you hear on the day of the
22 accident?

23 A I heard, "This is not a drill," twice. "This
24 is not, I repeat, this is not a drill."

25 Q Then what happened after that?

1 A I believe that -- I believe that the captain
2 at that time had enough of the PA system -- I'm not
3 positive on this, but I do remember that he was able to
4 get out to the emergency squad where the emergency was.

5 Now I don't know if it came over the radio or
6 the PA because the PA started cutting out right after
7 that, right about that time.

8 Part of the announcements were coming through
9 and part of them they weren't. And we radioed to the
10 bridge that the announcements were breaking up. Some
11 of them was coming here, it was all broken up, and then
12 it was just no good.

13 Q What happened after you lost communication?

14 A We listened on the radios.

15 Q The radios?

16 A Uh-huh.

17 Q Was that a problem?

18 A No. I mean it's a problem for the passengers
19 because they can't hear what's going on. You know,
20 because as in an emergency, they're going to say let
21 the passengers know if it's a false alarm or if the
22 fire is under control, you know, to help with passenger
23 control.

24 But, with the radios, I think we accomplished
25 the same thing -- radios and just, you know, letting

1 the passengers know what was going on, and speaking
2 loudly, getting everybody hushed up and letting
3 everybody know what was happening to keep them calm.

4 Q And did you use anything to help you
5 communicate with passengers? Or were you just speaking
6 loudly?

7 A I was speaking loudly.

8 Q Is that true for all the other crew members?
9 Were they just speaking loudly?

10 A Well, in the area where I was at, I was
11 letting the stewards know and to pass the word. But I
12 would also, I'd be in the middle of the crowd and, you
13 know, I'd hold my radio up because I'm kind of short.
14 I'd hold my radio up and get everybody hushed around
15 me. And I would talk real loud, like this
16 (demonstrating).

17 "This is what's happening and, people, we're
18 going to put on our life jackets now. Those people
19 that don't have jackets, don't worry. We're getting
20 the stewards to bring them off the boat deck. But I
21 want everybody in a jacket."

22 Stuff like that. And it went really well as
23 far as I could tell.

24 Q Where were you when you were saying this to
25 the passengers?

1 A I was in the foyer area on the boat deck
2 forward.

3 Q So during the time of the emergency, you
4 leave your station as a chief purser and you go to the
5 boat deck? Is that your emergency station?

6 A Yes, it is.

7 Q The boat deck?

8 A Uh-huh. I don't leave the purser's counter
9 until the captain tells me to.

10 Q Did you receive a lot of instructions from
11 the captain?

12 A No. I think my first instruction was after
13 everybody was above the passenger areas and on the boat
14 deck was for me to go to the boat deck myself.

15 And the next thing that I remember the
16 captain telling me was to have the passengers don their
17 life jackets, which had already been done.

18 Q Did you have any language problems? Any
19 problems communicating with the passengers?

20 A No.

21 Q Were there a lot of people from foreign
22 countries?

23 A No, not this trip.

24 Q What about the crew? Do most of them speak
25 English?

1 A All of the crew speaks English.

2 Q And what about any identification of the crew
3 members? Do you have any special identification where
4 crew members will know that you're in charge of the
5 evacuation, or they should follow you?

6 A Well, they know that they are to report to me
7 and that they are assigned to do whatever needs to be
8 done. You know, if I tell them that we need to do
9 this, they know that they do that.

10 I don't know because I'm the chief purser and
11 they know that, when they sign on with me, they learn
12 that by signing on when they first come on the vessel.

13 They're told their duties when they first
14 sign on with us.

15 Q They are told when they first come on,
16 they're told there's muster --

17 A When they first get their assignments, they
18 get their muster stations, when they come on board the
19 vessel.

20 Q That's the standard uniform that you're
21 wearing, which you have on now, a black vest and white
22 shirt?

23 A Yes, ma'am.

24 Q Do you wear any other colors when there's an
25 emergency that change your uniform somewhat? A hat? A

1 patch or anything in an emergency?

2 A No.

3 Q Or do you just use your standard uniform?

4 A No. No.

5 Q Is that the same for the other crew members?

6 A I believe so. I mean, as far as I know, we
7 don't have a patch or a special -- the other crew
8 members have their uniforms.

9 Q You said that passengers know what to do.
10 What type of information are passengers provided when
11 they first board the Columbia?

12 A Well, when we leave every port, we have an
13 announcement. And it's a SOLAS announcement, Safety of
14 Life at Sea. And we give them a lot of information
15 over the PA system when they first board.

16 I know that I've only been on this ship since
17 it came out and not even since it came out of the yard.

18 But, on our vessels, on the inside of the
19 passengers' state room doors, it has also what to do in
20 case of emergencies.

21 Q How was that information provided to
22 passengers once they board the vessel?

23 A Through the PA system.

24 Q Is someone making an announcement?

25 A Yes. We have a taped announcement, and we

1 also have announcements, you know, if the tape is not
2 working, we read it.

3 Q Okay, so there's something in writing that I
4 can get a copy of?

5 A I will look because we've been using the
6 tape. But, I will look around if you'd like a copy of
7 it.

8 Q But there's some text, some standard text.

9 A Well, there is.

10 Q Do you have a copy of the tape?

11 MR. STERN: Can we get a copy?

12 MS. WHEELER: I would imagine you could. I
13 don't know exactly how or where. But not on board I
14 can't.

15 MR. STERN: We've already talked about that.

16 MS. WHEELER: We did.

17 MR. STERN: Her and I talked about it
18 earlier.

19 MS. WHEELER: And I meant to do that. I've
20 just been busy.

21 MR. STERN: And we do have, up in the chief
22 mate's room, a copy of the Matanuska's SOLAS briefing.

23 And it's only a little different because they have
24 smoke detectors, and we don't. It's just a few
25 differences.

1 MS. TERRY WEAVER: You can introduce
2 yourself.

3 MR. STERN: Doug Stern.

4 MS. TERRY WEAVER: And you are alternate
5 chief mate on the Columbia?

6 MR. STERN: Yes. I was not here for the
7 incident.

8 MS. TERRY WEAVER: Right.

9 BY THE INTERVIEWER, MS. TERRY WEAVER:

10 Q If you know, how do you account for people as
11 they board the Columbia?

12 A When we take passage tickets, on the passage
13 tickets, it lets us know how many passengers on the
14 ticket. And the purser on the round is responsible for
15 collecting tickets from all the passengers when they
16 come on board.

17 Q Have you ever received any training on how to
18 manage a crowd of people? Four hundred people, that
19 many on board?

20 A No formal training. Not me personally.

21 Q Do you feel comfortable communicating with
22 people and managing a crowd during an emergency? Did
23 you feel comfortable?

24 A I did.

25 Q Have you ever had to do that before? Have

1 you been involved in an actual emergency before?

2 A No, ma'am.

3 Q Really?

4 A No.

5 MS. TERRY WEAVER: That's good.

6 Do you have any follow-up questions, Mr.

7 Bauer?

8 MR. BAUER: No. I was going to ask about
9 getting a copy.

10 MS. TERRY WEAVER: Okay, we're going to take
11 care of that clarification. Any from you?

12 MR. HURST: I have one question.

13 This is Jeff Hurst, Alaskan Highway.

14 BY MR. JEFF HURST:

15 Q Had you begun any of the STCW computer base
16 training?

17 A I have.

18 Q I take it you have not completed the module
19 on crowd management...

20 A You're right, but I have begun.

21 Q Those two modules which were just added not
22 too long ago to the other modules that were already on
23 our STCW computer-based training module.

24 MS. TERRY WEAVER: And that's computer-based.
25 They don't have someone to come in and provide the

1 training, or they --

2 MR. HURST: Computer-base training.

3 BY THE INTERVIEWER, MS. TERRY WEAVER:

4 Q What have you completed as far as the STCW
5 training?

6 A Module 1, I believe, the first one.

7 Q What were you taught? What type of things
8 did you go over?

9 A Well, all of the stuff that we already know,
10 pretty much. The basic areas of the ship, what they're
11 called, from the engine room to the deck. What a
12 muster station is and signages for those items as well,
13 you know.

14 Stuff about HAZMAT materials and training.
15 All the basic stuff that I already knew and I've
16 actually already been trained in. As we started the
17 HAZMAT training out here sometime ago, we actually did
18 have videos out here and classes on board ships.

19 Q Oh, really?

20 A Yes, when the HAZMAT training began. And
21 we'd take tests and turn them in and keep copies on the
22 ships, what not.

23 Q Did you have to implement any of your medical
24 training in this emergency?

25 A I did not.

1 Q Did you have to assist any of the passengers
2 with any medical complaints?

3 A I did. Most passengers, of course, had
4 anxiety. And there were passengers that had
5 preexisting heart conditions, asthma and diabetics.

6 I had probably -- I know of one asthma
7 patient that we found her medication for. We sent a
8 steward down to get her medication out of the room.
9 Probably, two or three passengers had heart medications
10 and they were worried.

11 So, to keep their anxiety down, we went down
12 and got their medication. And I had two or three
13 diabetics that were worried as well.

14 So, in order to keep their anxiety level
15 down, we accommodated them as best as we could, not
16 jeopardizing our own crew, of course.

17 Q Were there any passengers with disabilities?

18 A Yes, we had four passengers that were in
19 wheelchairs.

20 Q And how were they managed? How were they
21 taken care of?

22 A Well, they were kept real close to the --
23 they were in the forward muster area with me. And they
24 were kept really close to where we were evacuating
25 passengers through the one stairwell that goes down.

1 And because the fire had been extinguished
2 after the reflash, and because there was no immediate
3 danger of life, we sent down I believe one of the
4 wheelchair passengers. And they just wanted us to get
5 the evacuation moving a little bit faster because of
6 the way we were evacuating. And that we knew that the
7 passengers' lives were at stake at this point, but we
8 wanted to get them off the ship as fast as we could.

9 So, you know, they were taking care of their
10 blankets put on them by the stewards. And the stewards
11 were standing by talking to them and helping them. And
12 we evacuated a whole bunch of passengers after -- we
13 sent one elderly guy down first.

14 He was the one person I was concerned about,
15 a heart condition. He was about 80 years old and he
16 was the first one off the ship on to the Taku. We sent
17 him down first. He was the only one I was really
18 worried about.

19 And, after that, then we sent down one
20 wheelchair, then we sent down a whole bunch of other
21 people. And towards the end, we had the other three
22 wheelchair passengers down.

23 We had four guys carrying these people down
24 the stairs in the wheelchairs.

25 Q Did you have any involvement in the

1 collection of the -- did you do any drug and alcohol
2 testing?

3 A I did.

4 Q What did you do as far as that?

5 A I observed, I guess -- I'm not sure what the
6 correct term is -- Debbie Lorton and her giving her
7 urinalysis. I didn't actually watch her but I was
8 there in the room with her.

9 And then I also gave an urinalysis.

10 MS. TERRY WEAVER: Okay. Any other
11 questions?

12 (No response.)

13 MS. TERRY WEAVER: Give me an address or
14 phone number where we can reach you. Your work address
15 and number is fine.

16 MS. WHEELER: Okay.

17 MS. TERRY WEAVER: if we have any follow-up
18 questions for you.

19 MS. WHEELER: My home address, would that be
20 okay?

21 MS. TERRY WEAVER: That's up to you,
22 whichever you want.

23 MS. WHEELER: Yes. That's 8050 Pioneer
24 Drive.

25 MS. TERRY WEAVER: Pioneer?

1 MS. WHEELER: Yes. P-i-o-n-e-e-r.

2 THE INTERVIEWER: Okay.

3 MS. WHEELER: No. 203, Anchorage 99 -- what
4 is my zip -- 99504. And my home number is 907-360-
5 0049.

6 MS. TERRY WEAVER: Okay, that's 907-360-0049.

7 MS. WHEELER: And do you want dispatch
8 numbers? The dispatch number if I'm not at home and
9 I'm on a vessel somewhere?

10 That's 907-465-8842.

11 MR. STERN: And also the port captain's
12 number? The port captain's number would probably be
13 the best way to get a hold of anybody quickly.

14 It's 907-465-8801. She'll be able to get a
15 hold of any of the crew that you need to get a hold of.

16 MS. TERRY WEAVER: Well, thank you, Melissa.

17 MS. WHEELER: You're welcome.

18 (INTERVIEW CONCLUDED.)

19 MR. HURST: This is Jeff Hurst, Safety
20 Officer of the Alaska Marine Highway System. This is a
21 follow-up to Melissa's interview.

22 When she started talking about -- we both
23 started talking about computer-based training with
24 STCW. And then she started talking about videos and
25 handbooks, that's more on the HCT, the Hazard

1 Communication Training.

2 The SCTW expands on that and goes to what is
3 required by federal regulations. That's it.

4 MS. TERRY WEAVER: Thank you for clarifying
5 that.

6 (INTERVIEW CONCLUDED.)

7